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The New York Times
ON THE WEB

October 26, 2001

MISSILE DEFENSE

U.S., Awaiting Putin, Delays Missile Tests

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 25 — The Bush administration, moving to strike a deal on offensive and defensive strategic arms with Russia, has postponed three antimissile tracking tests that Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said today might be interpreted as violating the 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty.

The announcement came only four days after President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, speaking alongside President Bush in Shanghai, said the two nations had an "understanding that we can reach agreements," a comment widely interpreted to mean that they were headed toward a major amendment of the treaty.

President Bush and his senior national security advisers have maintained that the treaty is wildly out of date — Mr. Bush used the word "dangerous" in Shanghai — and must be drastically rewritten or scrapped. Mr. Rumsfeld's announcement today appeared to be intended to give Mr. Bush maximum negotiating flexibility in the days leading up to Mr. Putin's arrival here, on Nov. 12, for a three-day meeting that may result in an accord redefining the strategic relationship between the two countries.

On Wednesday, Mr. Bush met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and his national security team on the other element of the equation: a review of the nuclear posture of America that may include proposals for large cuts in its arsenal of strategic weapons.

The White House will most likely describe that proposal to Russia in the next few days, to meet Mr. Putin's demand that missile defense be linked, at least loosely, with cuts in offensive arsenals.

At a Pentagon news briefing today, Mr. Rumsfeld said that three missile defense tracking tests — two that had been scheduled for Wednesday and one for Nov. 14 — were postponed while discussions between the two presidents are under way.

"We have said we will not violate the treaty while it remains in force," said Mr. Rumsfeld, regarded as the administration's most unwavering advocate of a policy to "move beyond" the treaty. "In recent days, to keep from having it suggested that we might not be keeping that commitment, we have voluntarily restrained our ballistic missile defense test program."

Two senior White House officials said today that while the idea of delaying the test originated with Mr. Rumsfeld, it was, in the words of one, "heavily coordinated here."

"There was no need to do something that some in Russia might view as provocative, especially at this delicate moment," one official said.

While a series of meetings with Russia are planned before Mr. Putin's visit, it seems increasingly likely that whatever deal emerges — if a deal emerges — will be negotiated by the two presidents next month.

Mr. Rumsfeld's announcement today may have served two political purposes. It allowed the outspoken

defense secretary to put the Defense Department in sync with the White House's clear desire to reach an agreement with Russia next month. But it also served as a caution to advocates of the missile defense system that unless the treaty is abandoned, expanded or neutered, he cannot go ahead with the kind of aggressive testing necessary to deploy an effective system.

Senior administration officials confirmed that Mr. Rumsfeld had written to Mr. Bush in recent days to address his desire for accelerated research into missile defenses.

"The note expressed the opinion that we should make the public aware of the fact that we held back because of the treaty," a senior administration official said. "The note expressed the opinion that we should make the public aware that we continue to be constrained by the A.B.M. Treaty."

One administration official, who would not speak for attribution, said today: "I think there have always been some who just wanted to get out of that treaty — period. The broader view has been to get relief from it. Not partial relief. Not limited relief. Not constant renegotiations, but substantial relief. If we find a mutually acceptable arrangement with the Russians to move beyond the treaty, fine. It could take a variety of different forms. But if we are unable to get something that is mutually acceptable, we will exercise our right to withdraw."

Mr. Bush, who has called the treaty a "relic of the cold war," did not threaten imminent withdrawal from the pact when he met with Mr. Putin on Sunday in Shanghai, officials said.

Mr. Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, said that "no deadlines" were given to Mr. Putin at the meeting. However, Mr. Bush reiterated his dedication to missile defenses, saying that the attacks of Sept. 11 made it all the more important that the United States be protected against a full range of potential threats. Both sides understand that the deadline for reaching a deal is nearing, with a pending schedule of missile tests that would violate the treaty.

Senator Carl Levin, Democrat of Michigan and chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said in an interview today that he sensed a significant change in administration policy in favor of a negotiated accommodation with Russia. "I think that the odds are they are going to work out a deal," said Mr. Levin, who favors missile defense testing, but within the limits of the treaty.

Mr. Levin said the value of the postponed tests was "very, very slight, compared to the negative fallout that would occur if we pull out of an arms control treaty with a country whose support we surely want in Afghanistan and with whom, hopefully, we will have a whole new relationship."

All of the postponed tests would utilize an Aegis radar on a surface ship to track a ballistic missile and interceptor, and collect other data. No previous test has involved such a shipborne component, which is banned by the treaty. A Pentagon panel, the Compliance Review Group, which has to certify that all current work remains within the bounds of the treaty, advised against going ahead with the test.

Even so, Wednesday's test is now scheduled for late November or December, but without using the shipborne radar, said Lt. Col. Richard Lehner, spokesman for the Ballistic Missile Defense Office.

President Bush's view of the A.B.M. Treaty appears to have evolved since the campaign, when he came out wholly in favor of scrapping the pact. But after meeting Mr. Putin in Genoa in July, Mr. Bush ordered his national security team to link the consultations — not negotiations — on missile defenses and a major reduction of both nations' arsenals. Mr. Bush envisions a framework of relations that would dispose of treaties and seek to bind the two countries more broadly and more loosely through trade and economic and military ties.

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